

COLORADO DROUGHT: PAST AND PRESENT

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Drought is a major feature of the climate of Colorado and adjacent regions. The early inhabitants of this area recognized that droughts were a fact of life, as did some of the first Anglo-American explorers. The political and legal history of the State of Colorado reflects an awareness of the quantity, seasonality, and distribution of water resources in the state. The Colorado River at Lees Ferry was one of the first gage records to be reconstructed from tree rings, and this 450-year reconstruction reinforced the reality of periodic and recurring droughts. In spite of this history, the recent drought in Colorado appears to have taken some water managers by surprise, but it has resulted in a new awareness of the impact of sustained drought on the state, and the entire Colorado River Basin. The drought and its economic, environmental, and political consequences have rekindled interest in extended records of stream flow that can be derived from tree rings. Recent reconstructions for the Upper Colorado River Basin present some good news and some bad news for water resource managers, and raise questions about how to deal with the implications of the paleohydrologic record in the context of the Colorado River Compact and the Law of the River. As water managers begin to consider these data, the challenge to paleoscientists is to present the information in the stream flow reconstructions in a way that is relevant to water management concerns, and to work collaboratively to find the best ways to incorporate reconstructions into water resource planning and decision-making.